

Prophetic Mercy and Empathy as a Social Outlook

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The essay explains the concepts of mercy and empathy mean as exemplified by the actions and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ

We often make an assumption that the average man might be naturally confrontational or hostile to Islam and Muslims. We all, of course, process media information in different ways; there are those who might be more susceptible to stereotyping than others depending on their background information, demographics and genuine concerns. When the prisoner Thumāma ibn Uthāl (God be pleased with him) decided to accept Islam, he said to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ that there was nothing he despised more than “your land, but now your land has become the most beloved of lands to me”.¹ This means that his *othering* of Islam and Muslims affected not only his perception of the Prophet ﷺ, but also of the land associated with the Prophet ﷺ. The Prophet’s ﷺ blessed face, his religion and city were all a point of concern for Thumāma, but Prophet Muhammad’s ﷺ transformative character and forbearance opened a new space of understanding for the prisoner. Though he initially assumed that the Prophet ﷺ could in fact have him killed, he also knew that his release from captivity was a possibility.

In our engagement with others, we should remember that we as humans are mostly comforted by similar things — displays of kindness and mercy. God describes Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as an embodiment of merciful character: “And We have not sent you (O Muḥammad) except as a mercy to the worlds.”² Mercy, compassion and empathy are interlinked features of the best of what all people seek. We prefer mercy over harshness, forbearance over rage, kindness over cruelty. The Prophet ﷺ instructed that kindness be applied in every situation, once teaching his wife ‘Ā’isha (may God be pleased with her): “Kindness is not found in something except that it makes it beautiful, and it is not removed from something except that it makes it tarnished.” God describes Himself with the most beautiful names of *Al-Raḥmān*, *Al-Raḥīm*; the Merciful, Gracious, Bestower of Mercy. God commands mercy in every situation and will deal with us in relation to our dealings with others. The Prophet ﷺ explained,

“The merciful will be shown mercy by the Most Merciful. Be merciful to those on the earth and the One in the heavens will have mercy upon you.”³

Ibn al-Qayyim explained the Prophet’s ﷺ words:

“And God (exalted is He) is merciful, and He loves the merciful ones, and He veils the sins of people and He loves those who veil the sins of others ”Whoever pardons others, God will pardon him; whoever forgives others, God will forgive him; whoever excuses others, God will excuse him;

whoever shows excellence unto others, God will deal excellently towards him. As you do so shall be done unto you, so be how you choose for indeed God will be unto you as you are unto His servants.”⁴

In order for the truth of empathic concern to be realised and to offset tendencies of othering and dehumanisation, it is a holistic appreciation of mercy that needs to be realised. In everything around us, among humans and animals there is a part of that mercy which God bestowed upon creation. This is something the Muslim must never lose sight of. All people, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, have something of mercy – of kindness, compassion, empathy, love, and so our approaches, interactions and communication must be inspired by the same spirit of mercy. The Prophet ﷺ instructed us to have a general mercy for all, to look upon creation with an eye of compassion:

“‘You will never have faith until you love each other. Shall I tell you what will make you love each other?’ They said, ‘Of course, O Messenger of God.’ The Prophet said: ‘Spread peace between yourselves. By the one in whose hand is my soul, you will not enter Paradise until you are merciful.’

They said, ‘O Messenger of God, all of us are merciful.’ The Prophet said: ‘Actually, it is not mercy between yourselves, but rather it is mercy in general, it is mercy in general.’”⁵

Defining Empathy and a Prophetic Empathy

“Empathy is the capacity to share the happiness or sadness, the emotions and feelings of another person. This ability leads to understanding, to compassion and to a wide range of other connections between people. There are two ways that we are able to experience empathy: one, because we have been in the situation that the other person has. We know from personal experience how it feels, and the other is because we can imagine how they feel. Our ability to imagine may come from a similar experience of our own, from a story of a friend or family member who has had that experience or from the observations of what happens to a stranger. And although empathy can be a way of sharing someone else’s joy or happiness, the empathy that connects difficulties is the one that’s most likely to move us to action. Understanding the troubles of others can bring a focused response, a focused kind of help by trying to right a wrong, by trying to fix a problem, or simply by sharing an understanding. These actions can be as simple as a smile or as complex as an international relief effort in Haiti.”⁶

What Dr. Lisa Rossbacher touches upon is the idea that human codes of behaviour exist in a universal sense, between all humans, and therefore feeling for others is reflective in both a physical and figurative way. It invokes feelings of one’s own vulnerability and with a recognising that the dominant emotions prevalent in war – fear – is universal to all humans including enemy populations. It is “in the acknowledgement of one’s own vulnerability lies the beginning of empathy.”⁷ This ‘overlapping’ of one’s self onto another’s experience stems from the relationship between feelings of trust or empathy and morality. One can imagine the pain or pleasure or future bearing of a person’s life through a consideration of one’s own pain and pleasure, and thus prevents us from acting solely on self-interest to provide an incentive to perceive one’s self from the vantage point of others.⁸ Naomi Head notes that despite the philosophical richness of empathy in the discourses of Western thinkers such as Adam Smith, Rousseau, Hannah Arendt and Martha Nussbaum, focus on empathy in International Relations theories have not received much attention.⁹

It is in the imagining of the unknown who dwell in unknown spaces that makes the action of empathy a challenging, yet necessary prospect. How might we transport ourselves, our experiences, feelings and thoughts into a life and landscape of the unknown, too bare and bleak to be understood? What names might we assign the nameless, what voice unto the voiceless and what life

might we render unto the buried? It is in trying to imagine, sometimes the unimaginable, that empathy begins to figure. This can be seen here in an account of Viktor Frankl in which he juxtaposes the deeply melancholic and fear-evoking with the intensity of relief expressed through the joy of prisoners on a journey from Auschwitz to Dachau, Viktor Frankl is unequivocal in emphasising the remarkably unique nature of his experience:

“Take as an example something that happened on our journey from Auschwitz to the camp affiliated with Dachau. We had all been afraid that our transport was heading for the Mauthausen camp. We became more and more tense as we approached a certain bridge over the Danube which the train would have to cross to reach Mauthausen, according to the statement of experienced traveling companions. Those who have never seen anything similar cannot possibly imagine the dance of joy performed in the carriage by the prisoners when they saw that our transport was not crossing the bridge and was instead heading “only” for Dachau.”¹⁰

Christina Twomey’s analysis of a series of photographs documenting the Congo atrocity from 1904-13 are very insightful in the context of this study. A series of photographs were taken in 1904 by Christian missionaries working in Belgian King Leopold’s Congo Free State. The photographs depict the brutal abuse meted out against the Congolese people, showing mutilation, flogging and chaining. During this time in Congo, villages were required to harvest a specific quantity of rubber for Belgian franchises. Failure to meet the targets could result in torture and even a massacre of the village’s inhabitants. A campaign to end the brutality was organised by the British-based Congo Reform Association (1904-13) who utilised photographs as evidence of abuse collected in books written by sympathisers.

One of the photographs that would become instrumental to the aims of the Association’s campaign was taken by the missionary Mrs. Alice Seeley Harris whilst working for the Congo Balolo Mission. The context of the photograph concerns a man, Nsala, who approached Mrs. Harris’s missionary station carrying the hand and foot of his daughter wrapped in a parcel of leaves. The hand and foot were all that remained after sentries had eaten the girl as a punishment upon her village for failing to reach their rubber targets. The pictures were important in authenticating the experiences of victims.

In this picture, together with the image of a severed hand and foot, it is the father’s grief as he stares at the remains of his daughter that is evocatively unsettling. Nsala had brought the remains of his daughter to Alice and her colleague Edgar Stannard to validate the brutality. Stannard’s response is one that speaks precisely of the imagined storying and the crucial role of empathy in actively pursuing change to a circumstance: “We were sickened as we looked, and thought of the innocent little child, and pictured her running about but a short time before. We tried to enter a little into the feelings of the unhappy father.”

Twomey considers the way Alice’s own personal loss may have provided a stimulus for a heightened empathic outlook. She may have been reliving her own loss, as whilst in England in 1901 she had given birth to a daughter, Margaret. When she returned to Africa in 1902 she left her eight-month-old daughter behind.¹¹ Could this temporary separation with her own children act as a stimulus to her empathy? It is hard to tell, but one can surmise that the feelings of guilt for the father and gratitude for her own children are likely emotions in such a setting. That is, one can associate someone’s loss with one’s own personal tragedy or life experience. The latter lies at the heart of empathetic discourse.

Empathy as Perspective Taking

Though there can never be a full understanding of the context and factors that make up another

person's life circumstances or what a person must have 'felt' in that circumstance, there is nonetheless a realisation, through critical self-reflection of one's own vulnerability, what one had felt (mediated by the gradients of memory) at a similar moment. It need not mimic the circumstance, setting, value of gender or time in history, but is existential in as much as 'feeling for' contributes to our very own make up of 'self'. When the Muslim speaks with others, he or she should be able to insert their own empathetic considerations onto the addressee. Mothers are able to 'feel' out of their own maternal considerations, fathers too can appreciate the challenges and joys of fatherhood. People in a society can relate to the same kinds of social concerns like street crime, rise in housing costs, university tuition fees, retirement and loneliness.

Empathy is the ability to share in the emotions of another person, in his or her happiness or sadness. This can be done through perspective taking, recalling a time wherein we had been in the same or similar situation. We knew how such an experience felt and can appreciate how that other person is feeling. Such cognitive processing can produce strong emotions of compassion, of sympathy and so many other connections between people. We might even associate with another's feelings due to what we know of them and due to the degree of closeness to them. This is shown beautifully in the following narration:

"The Prophet ﷺ said, 'A man felt very thirsty while he was on the way, there he came across a well. He went down the well, quenched his thirst and came out. Meanwhile he saw a dog panting and licking mud because of excessive thirst. He said to himself, "This dog is suffering from thirst as I did." So, he went down the well again and filled his shoe with water and watered it. God thanked him for that deed and forgave him. The people said, 'O God's Messenger! Is there a reward for us in serving the animals?' He replied: 'Yes, there is a reward for serving any living being.'"¹²

The Prophet ﷺ was concerned about people learning to have empathy for others. That is, we are able to perspective-take, to note how others feel in different situations. The tradition is edifying in so many ways. It teaches us to consider human emotions, sensitivities and boundaries in our relationship with others. It reminds us that in our human instincts and tendencies, we are similar at many levels and in particular with respect to feelings for 'our' selves. Absolute binaries of self and otherness are challenged in this tradition in that it places the self and others, 'people', and 'their mothers/daughters/sisters...' in a frame of togetherness. The frame of togetherness and the perspective-taking is illustrative in the following narration:

"A young man came to the Prophet ﷺ, peace and blessings be upon him, and he said, "O Messenger of God, give me permission to commit adultery." The people turned to rebuke him, saying, "Quiet! Quiet!" The Prophet said, "Come here." The young man came close and he told him to sit down. The Prophet said, "Would you like that for your mother?" The man said, "No, by God, may I be sacrificed for you." The Prophet said, "Neither would people like it for their mothers. Would you like that for your daughter?" The man said, "No, by God, may I be sacrificed for you." The Prophet said, "Neither would people like it for their daughters. Would you like that for your sister?" The man said, "No, by God, may I be sacrificed for you." The Prophet said, "Neither would people like it for their sisters. Would you like that for your aunts?" The man said, "No, by God, may I be sacrificed for you." The Prophet said, "Neither would people like it for their aunts." Then, the Prophet placed his hand on him and he said, "O God, forgive his sins, purify his heart, and guard his chastity." After that, the young man never again inclined to anything sinful."

In another narration, the Prophet ﷺ said to him, "Then hate what God has hated, and love for your brother what you love for yourself."¹³

When we refuse the points of connectedness among us, we are in the process of denying our own humanity and the humanity of others. Arriving at such a place makes any violation against another all the more possible.

There are other narrations that espouse the same message, communicating the importance and of the empathic practice. The Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said,

“None of you has faith until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.”¹⁴

And, “The servant does not attain the reality of faith until he loves for people what he loves for himself of goodness.”¹⁵

In the aforementioned narration, the Prophet ﷺ mentioned ‘people’ in place of ‘brother’ and there are other narrations that also read like this. Many scholars in fact interpreted “brother” in such traditions to indicate a universal type of brotherhood, including all of humanity. Imam al-Nawawī for example comments on this tradition, highlighting the greater religious love a Muslim would have to share Islam with everyone in the human brotherhood – both Muslims and non-Muslims:

“This is interpreted as brotherhood in general, such that it includes the disbeliever and the Muslim. So he should love for his brother, the disbeliever, what he loves for himself which is his entering Islam, just as he should love for his brother Muslim that he remains in Islam. For this reason, it is recommended to supplicate for the disbeliever to be guided. The meaning of love here is an intention for good and benefit, and this meaning is religious love, not human love.”¹⁶

Imbuing the sentiments of affinity and fellow-feeling find an important place in the Islamic tradition, which are intrinsically linked to adopting a comprehensive empathy for others. Empathy is a very important Islamic attribute. Understanding the life experiences and thus motivations of another can provide us with much clarity about another’s way of thinking, insecurities, fears and joys. Our empathising with another can take different strands. Sometimes due to our own fears, prejudices and apprehensions of another, we are unable to show real empathy. Other times we show ‘witness empathy’, an empathy wherein we are cognisant of our own vulnerability and seek to alleviate the harm and suffering of another.

“By the Morning Brightness”

This is shown beautifully in Sūrah al-Ḍuḥā in which the Prophet ﷺ, having undergone unease at the six-month delay in revelation was met with the revelation of this new hope-inspiring chapter. The chapter is consoling the Prophet ﷺ, a reminder of God’s favours upon him and a promise of a better future. Before we continue our discussion of this Sūrah, let us remember the great relevance of this Sūrah for a people, including ourselves, so often beset with anxieties, uncertainties and depression. Our vision as Muslims is to show the profound relevance of the Qur’ānic message with whom we engage. The Qur’ān is relevant at an intrinsically human level and speaks to us and also speaks to our addressees before we speak among ourselves.

“By the morning brightness

and by the night when it grows still,

your Lord has not forsaken you [Prophet], nor does He hate you.”¹⁷

Upon reminding the Prophet ﷺ that God had indeed provided him succour, shelter and provision, the verses follow on to instructions about how others should be treated:

“Did He not find you an orphan and shelter you?

Did He not find you lost and guide you?

Did He not find you in need and make you self-sufficient?

So do not be harsh with the orphan

and do not chide the one who asks for help;

talk about the blessings of your Lord.”¹⁸

The empathy bearing in the aforementioned verses is in relation to what the Prophet ﷺ experienced as a young man. That personal circumstances of poverty and/or loneliness can be understood in relation to how others are to be perceived and treated teaches us the importance of having a field of affective and cognitive insight in our relation with others.

Ibn Kathīr explains the injunctions to the Prophet ﷺ as an instruction to treat others in relation to a recalling of the Prophet's ﷺ own life experiences as a young man. He explains:

“So do not be harsh with the orphan” by commenting “remember when you were an orphan.”

“And do not chide the one who asks for help” by commenting “remember when you were poor” and “to be unto the orphan like a merciful father.” Qatada said that it means “to treat the poor with mercy and softness.”¹⁹

There are many things we can do to foster communication based on paradigms of empathy. The task is to try and see the world from another's point of view. The Prophet ﷺ once said that when he leads the prayer, he intends to pray a lengthy prayer, “and then I hear a child crying so I shorten my prayer as I know his crying will distress his mother.”²⁰ The Prophet ﷺ was cognisant of the needs of others and could understand the world of mother and child in relation to what could distress them at that point. The audible distress of another person actualised a kind of witness empathy in the Prophet ﷺ seeking to alleviate both the mother and child's distress. The latter is similar to when someone has offered to buy you a hot drink on a cold day, or buy you food when you had been hungry, or someone embraced you on a day when you had been feeling down. As recipients of another's kindness, we are not always alert to the motivations and intentions behind another person's goodness, but we do feel a sense of his action corroborating with something we had been feeling at that precise moment. What another person sees of us is not always known to us, but the interchange of unspoken emotions at that point can be transformative. Empathy is to see another.

To be empathic, one is required to be non-judgemental and look at the ‘human being before him or her. Remember that each person is valuable in their own right and to afford people this recognition is crucial. Sometimes, based on a person's life experience they might have been victims of discrimination whereby their humanness was questioned or denied. If a person is judgemental and considers the other as a stereotyped ‘Other’, it is unlikely he or she will be able to feel for that person and try and understand things from that person's point of view or life experience. The Prophet ﷺ gave to each person an individual consideration, to such an extent that his companions would say that they felt the most important in the Prophet's ﷺ company. Even though the Prophet ﷺ may be around others, he made the one he communicated with feel as though he was acknowledged the most. A beautiful example of the way the Prophet ﷺ immediately responded empathically upon seeing a group of barefoot and destitute people entering into Madina is shown in this narration:

“Mundhir ibn Jarīr reported on the authority of his father: While we were in the company of the Messenger of God ﷺ in the early hours of the morning, some people came there (who) were barefooted, naked, wearing striped woollen clothes, or cloaks, with their swords hung (around their necks). Most of them, nay, all of them, belonged to the tribe of Mudar. The colour of the face of the Messenger of God ﷺ underwent a change when he saw them in poverty. He then entered (his house) and came out and commanded Bilal (to pronounce Adhān). He pronounced Adhān and Iqāma, and he observed prayer (along with his Companion) and then addressed (them reciting verses of the Holy Qur'ān): “O people, fear your Lord, Who created you from a single being” to the end of the verse,” God is ever a Watcher over you” (4:1). (He then recited) a verse of Sūrah al-Ḥashr: “Fear God. and let every soul consider that which it sends forth for the morrow and fear God” (59:18). (Then the audience began to vie with one another in giving charity.) Some donated a dinar, others a dirham, still others clothes, some donated a sa' of wheat, some a sa' of dates; till he said: (Bring) even if it is half a date. Then a person from among the Anṣār came there with a money bag which his hands could scarcely lift; in fact, they could not (lift). Then the people followed continuously, till I saw two heaps of eatables and clothes, and I saw the face of the Messenger glistening, like gold (on account of joy). The Messenger of God ﷺ said: He who sets a good precedent in Islam, there is a reward for him for this (act of goodness) and reward of that also who acted according to it subsequently, without any deduction from their rewards; and he who sets in Islam an evil precedent, there is upon him the burden of that, and the burden of him also who acted

upon it subsequently, without any deduction from their burden.”²¹

The men, certainly ‘Othered’ by different standards and in different settings, were brought into the conversation by the Prophet ﷺ and sheltered by his care. Troubled by what he saw, the Prophet’s ﷺ face changed, meaning his displeasure and sympathy were visible on his blessed countenance. Not only was the Prophet ﷺ moved by what he saw, he called the Muslims together to remind them of the witness empathy they were required to exhibit. The Qur’ānic verse he chose to recite is further revealing – a reminder that God created us from a single soul. All of us are the same in that our origin is one. On the plain of Arafat, the Prophet ﷺ explained: “All of you are from Ādam and Ādam was from dust.”²² The charitable response of the companions was reassuring and in witnessing the scene the Prophet’s ﷺ face “became glistening like gold” in approval.

Feeling for the other

Empathy is also about communicating your understanding of another person’s feelings. It provides great relief when someone else identifies with your feelings and you know that your distress or concern is worthy enough to be listened to. It goes a very long way, when speaking with someone who is recounting a personal story, tragedy, or sharing good news, to reassure them, or to acknowledge their difficulties or happiness. In such circumstances, you may express their importance by simply uttering “It sounds like you had a really difficult time. Tell me more about it/how did you cope?” The simple saying of “tell me more...” about a happy or a sad description puts the person in a place of importance. It then makes your words, guidance and instruction better received and appreciated.

Some of the most evocative accounts of empathy emerge in the most precarious situations. With realisation of a sense of finality or in the context of an act of defiance, humans can be propelled into enacting behaviours that are not typical even in the said circumstances. These might be viewed as indeed atypical in so much as the contexts to which they belong and the sense of self-sacrifice found in them. The ‘sharing’ in another’s pain, the ‘imagining’ of that pain is, as Rossbacher defined, the foundation of empathy.

Tzvetan Todorov draws upon several examples of Holocaust victims who, faced with death, chose to pre-empt their own ‘subsequent’ deaths by dying alongside others. Todorov describes the case of J. Kosciuszkowa who describes a mother who gave birth in Auschwitz. Though she had hidden the baby for five months, when he was found and taken from her, she chose to go with him, “clutching her son to her breast, she carried him into the gas chambers.”²³

Another case Todorov mentions is that of a Dutch woman who, when her husband was selected for the gas chambers, chose to go with him.²⁴ The way that we interpret empathy, its actualisation, significance and effect will vary depending on different situations. David Guez, a Jewish individual forced into hiding during Nazi rule of North Africa commented on the brave role played by Arab Muslims during the Holocaust. He describes an Arab gentleman who would afford him an extra loaf of bread: “sometimes it was simply an extra loaf of bread that made the greatest difference to us.”²⁵

Empathy, as Rossbacher commented can be as simple as a smile – though a smile in a precarious moment in which there is an absence of all that would socially abjure the symbol of a smile is a profound empathising. An illustration of the significance of something as simple as a smile in the context of alienation and Othering, of even mass suffering and genocide of *Others* is seen in a remarkable rescuing initiative of Pastor Andre Trocme. In 1942 when deportation of Jews began in France, in the village of Le Chambon, France, Pastor Andre Trocme and his wife Magda became increasingly concerned to help in the effort to rescue Jews fleeing deportation to concentration camps. With other parishes, the Trocme’s encouraged their congregations to shelter Jews and for

their cities to become cities of refuge. They set up a number of “safe houses” where Jews could hide, and Jewish children under false identities were enlisted in the cities’ schools. Many refugees were thereafter helped to escape to Switzerland following an underground-railroad network. The example that follows below of a refugee describing Andre Trocme helps us to identify empathy seeking in human encounters. The effect can be lasting and transformative.

“Another refugee replied, when I asked her what kind of man he was: “That smile...that smile...the smile of that man, that smile...He did not have to say anything, just ‘Ça va?’ and that was enough.” Still another said that upon arriving at the presbytery she was greeted with immense warmth, as if he would fold her in his arms and protect her lovingly against any harm. A few minutes after she met him, he offered to lend her money, which she did not need. A little later, she found out that he had almost no money himself.”²⁶

The refugee comes to imagine a consequence of compassionate display and in the description, the attachment between the pair is not a product of a complex relationship but one described through gestures and symbols. For the refugee, Trocme becomes iconic, saviour-like and embodying. It is in a smile, a statement and an imagined touch that the Other can transpose Trocme’s empathy within herself. Todorov explains that ‘sometimes a look sufficed’.

David Rodman recalls that as a convoy of prisoners were marched to a forced-labour camp in Poland, a young man came out to see them and looked at the prisoners with a “noble face [that] expressed deep sorrow and compassion...I know exactly next to which he stood. I still can see the look of suffering on the young man’s face, the exact color of his shirt...It impressed me that someone felt for me and cared because I suffered.”²⁷ These examples stem from an imagining of how another person feels and one cannot fully understand the complexities of each human encounter, especially in such precarious moments. No human encounter is simple and “no quantity of meaning, no matter how sincerely ascribed, can void the subjective quality of each meeting.”²⁸

Timothy Snyder in his chapter entitled ‘The Righteous Few’ considers the rescuing of Jews during the Holocaust as a social and emotional transition, describing the initial uncertainty and alienation to “encounters in grey”, and the simple meeting with others as “encounters in black”. This willingness to self-sacrifice, he maintains, is due to an imagined mental storying about what their own lives might have been like if they were in such precarious situations and further, how the victims’ lives might be different if their situations were to change. This is empathy. Not simply the feeling what it means to be another, but also the feeling of one’s own incompleteness, a realisation of one’s own vulnerability in light of another, which Snyder makes reference to when describing: “The risk to self was compensated by a vision of love, of marriage, of children, of enduring the war into peace and into some more tranquil future.”²⁹

Snyder further cites an example of an elderly Ukrainian couple, Marko and Oksana Verbievka who came upon a Jewish girl from Nowograd-Wolynsk in Volhynia. She had previously survived a shooting in which her parents were murdered and thereafter sought refuge with a woman who subsequently took to abusing her. Finally, the older couple took her in and upon listening to her ordeals they cried in sympathy. Oksana reassured her, “Be at peace, little child, forget all this; you will be a daughter to us, we have no children, everything will be yours.” After a moment Oksana remarked “But you won’t abandon us later, will you?”³⁰ This encounter coalesces a sense of grieving in both parties, the girl and the couple. Acting to secure safety for herself in the present, the couple’s empathy emanates from the memories of a childless past and also perhaps through the juxtaposing of the girl’s youthfulness with their own aging. That “you will be a daughter to us” reflects an incentive for the couple’s empathising; the girl could be used for help on the couple’s farm. The encounter speaks very much of the couple’s imagined storying of their own vulnerability without the young girl in a sense of the present and their imagined past. They empathise with the girl when equating her with a child they never had, and thus the girl’s suffering might be akin to an imagining of their ‘own child’s’ suffering. One need not speak of an unspoken empathy since empathy, unlike visual codes, which might deliberate on sympathetic tendencies, are not required.

Empathy as Imagined Storying

Empathy is an imagined storying and the actors can be very much one's own. The storying is told on one's own canvas. If re-humanising requires the ability to empathise then the fine points we recognise in our own physical and emotional being need to be considered in other people.

The best example of the way simple gestures can have a transformative effect on the

lives of others, and draw people closer to God comes from the Prophet ﷺ. He taught that da'wa is the entirety of you. Words well-spoken can have a lasting impact. It is often the 'how' of what is said that transcends the 'what' of whatever was said.

After the conquest of Makkah, one of the Makkans, Fuḍāla ibn Umayr, though having nominally accepted Islam, was keen on revenge, and had vowed to assassinate the Prophet ﷺ. As the Prophet ﷺ was performing ṭawāf (circumambulation of the Ka'ba), Fuḍāla had hidden his sword under his clothing and was preparing himself for the dastardly deed he was about to commit. Instantly, he found himself within reach of the Prophet ﷺ. The Prophet looked up at Fuḍāla and asked, "What is it that you were saying to yourself?" Fuḍāla brushed off the question by saying he was simply praising God. The Prophet ﷺ smiled at Fuḍāla and said, "Ask God to forgive you," placing his hand on Fuḍāla's chest. Fuḍāla would later say, "By God, from the moment he lifted his hand from my chest, there remained nothing of God's creation except that he was more beloved to me than it."³¹

To further emphasise the great importance of leaving an impression and displaying integrity of character on others, the Prophet ﷺ smiled and displayed patient forbearance when Abu Bakr (God be pleased with him) abstained from responding to an individual who was insulting him. When, however, Abu Bakr resorted to meeting the man's words with similar retorts, the Prophet ﷺ became angry and left. He ﷺ later explained, "An angel was with you, responding on your behalf. But when you said back to him some of what he said, a devil arrived, and it is not for me to sit with devils."³²

There is here a great learning for the Muslims. Sometimes people react to Muslims the way media has prepared them to react – with fear and ignorance. Images of women in burqa, sensationalist headlines, stories of immigration, war, conflict, as well as, isolated stories of misconduct, are amplified in the media and have a strong bearing on people's perceptions of others. So too were the Makkans of Quraysh interested in exhilarating a campaign of slander against the Prophet ﷺ and his companions, but the Prophet ﷺ was keen to show and teach that the believers should not lose sight of their focus in conveying the call to Islam in such hostile environments.

There is a point about survival or even saving face in such environments, and another about leaving a beautiful message about Islam, through words or character. In the example of Abu Bakr, we are reminded that shayṭān is ever keen that any goodness we might have set out to achieve is derailed when a person stoops to the level of those who he is insulted by. Our actions and behaviour ought to be driven by Islamic principles of beautiful conduct.

Fitting with the way God described the Prophet ﷺ "you are but a mercy to the worlds"³³, and "upon an exalted [standard] of character"³⁴. It was the standard of the Prophet ﷺ to show forbearance and nobility when insulted and attacked. It was those key verses in Sūrah al-Fuṣṣilat that marked the transformation in a people who had not previously encountered a holistic message centred on belief in One God, living a life aware of a Day of divine accountability and with a strong emphasis on displaying a great standard of character towards others:

"Good and evil cannot be equal. [Prophet], repel evil with what is better and your enemy will become as close as an old and valued friend."³⁵

The Prophet ﷺ was rigorous with his companions to ensure that they do not overburden others even in leading people in lengthy prayers and in not overloading and causing distress to their animals. He wept upon seeing a camel that was heavily weakened, he put his hand on its head and comforted it and then told his companion: “Do you not fear God about this beast that God has given in your possession? It has complained to me that you keep it hungry and load it heavily which fatigues it.”³⁶ It would aggrrieve him that people were stricken by poverty, lacked basic essentials and were struggling through life. God describes him in the Qur’ān:

“A Messenger has come to you from among yourselves. Your suffering distresses him: he is deeply concerned for you and full of kindness and mercy towards the believers.”³⁷

When the Prophet ﷺ embarked towards Ṭā’if in the hope that its people would perhaps be receptive to the Islamic message, the process of othering in Makkah through the labeling of the Prophet ﷺ a ‘mad man’, a ‘sorcerer’, ‘bewitched’, influenced the attitude of the people of Ṭā’if. They resorted to pelting him with stones, to ridicule and cursing him. At this junction in the Prophetic mission, we reflect on the way he exhibited a remarkable forbearance and patience. ‘Ā’isha (may God be pleased with her) reported that she once asked the Prophet ﷺ, “Have you encountered a day harder than the Day of Uḥud?” To which the Prophet ﷺ said the hardest day was the day he went to Ṭā’if. He related the happening:

“Your tribe has abused me much, and the worst was the day of ‘Aqaba when I presented myself to ‘Abd Yalayl b. ‘Abd Kulāl, and he did not respond to what I sought. I departed, overwhelmed with grief, and I could not relax until I found myself at a tree where I lifted my head towards the sky to see a cloud shading me. I looked up and saw Gabriel in it. He called out to me, saying, ‘God has heard your people’s saying to you and how they have replied, and God has sent the Angel of the Mountains to you that you may order him to do whatever you wish to these people.’ The Angel of the Mountains greeted me and said, ‘O Muḥammad, order what you wish, and if you like, I will let the two mountains fall upon them.’ I said, ‘No; rather, I hope that God will bring from their descendants people who will worship God alone without associating partners with Him.’”³⁸

A most beautiful example of the way the Prophet ﷺ reacted to those intent on othering him through a caricaturing of his name is shown here:

“Arwā b. Harb (also known as Um Jamīl, the wife of Abu Lahab) would follow the Prophet ﷺ around to hurt and humiliate him and used to taunt him, ‘Mudhammam (the dispraised) we have denied, and his religion we have loathed, and his command we have defied!’ Instead of responding to her, he would simply find solace in saying to his Companions, ‘Don’t you see how God diverts from me the curses and insults of Quraysh? They insult Mudhammam, and they curse Mudhammam, while I am Muḥammad (the Praised One)!’”³⁹

The Prophet’s ﷺ name was of course ‘Muḥammad’ (the praised one) and the wife of Abu Lahab hoped that by inverting his name to ‘Mudhammam’ (the dispraised one), the Prophet ﷺ would fall into disrepute among the townsfolk. Yet the Prophet ﷺ showed magnanimity in his ignoring the woman’s words, knowing that his words and character would far deeper penetrate the fabric of his society and our global world, as well as knowing that the name ‘Muḥammad’ would forever invite praise and salutations.

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